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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAMA 000721

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2014

TAGS: MOPS PHUM PREL KPAO BA

SUBJECT: BAHRAINIS TO WATCH ABU GHRAIB TORTURE TRIALS

CAREFULLY

Classified By: CDA Robert S. Ford, reason 1.5 (d)

¶1. (C) The editor in chief of the Akhbar al-Khaleej newspaper group told CDA and PAO over lunch on May 16 that the U.S. can regain some of its lost credibility with the Bahraini public if the soldiers responsible for torture at Abu Ghraib prison are punished sternly and visibly. He expects the Bahraini public will follow the trials with very keen interest. Some Bahrainis, including his children studying in the U.S., anticipate the soldiers will be expelled from the Army but released upon return to the U.S. Such an outcome would further reinforce widespread public sentiment that the American Government is not really interested in human rights in Iraq or anywhere else in the Arab World.

¶2. (C) The editor said that by contrast if the trials are serious, explain the evidence fully and publicly, and serious prison terms result, many Bahrainis will conclude that the torture was truly the work of only a relatively small group and not a broader systemic problem. The editor said the very best thing the U.S. Government could do would be to hold serious trials and ensure they are broadcast on television, including Arabic satellite networks. He had no doubt millions of Arabs would watch the coverage closely. He opined that Bahrain TV, for example, would surely carry the trials locally by linking to the satellite channels.

¶3. (C) Speaking separately, the University of Bahrain president told PAO on May 16 that the transparency so far of the American investigation was a plus and was limiting to a small extent the real damage to American credibility.

¶4. (C) Comment: These comments track with what we are hearing from other contacts in Bahrain about the importance of the trials. Meeting with us privately May 15 the Foreign Minister, for example, said the most important thing for the U.S. Government now is to hold the trials and punish the guilty. It was striking that the Akhbar al-Khaleej editor, one of the most strident opponents of U.S. policy in the region, thought the trials help restore some of our credibility, especially if the trials were aired on TV.

FORD